

# KMUNITY RADIO

## THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"KMUN was never meant to be musical wallpaper. KMUN continues to stimulate and exasperate, to excite and irritate, to give ourselves a place to express ourselves and allow others to do the same."

~JOSEPH STEVENSON,  
FORMER PROGRAM DIRECTOR

"KMUN is a gift, a jewel, a miracle. I love you."

~A KMUN LISTENER

The only public radio station on the Oregon coast celebrates its 17th year of broadcasting at the beginning of its second century. Astoria's KMUN-FM, *The Mouth of the Columbia River* has been on the air since April 17, 1983.

Broadcast from the Tillicum House near the Astoria riverfront, KMUN reaches north into Washington and south and east along the Oregon coast and into the coastal mountains. KMUN operates through a subscription economy and is plugged into the world via satellite programming. This quantum lurch into the 21st century is expensive and controversial and is not paid for by the usual advertisements for the banal and botulistic. KMUN depends primarily upon revenues provided by listeners and functions as a non-profit entity.

KMUN offers just about everything a radio station can attempt to do and operates daily on the cultural edge where megamedia fears to follow. It broadcasts an eclectic smorgasbord of imaginative, provocative, exotic, and occasionally dreadful programming. It is seldom bland or boring.

KMUN, like most public or eccentric radio stations, is at the far left of the FM dial. The left side of the dial has for years been casual, even libertine, similar to the early years of computer internets when they were wild and free before commercial competition began coveting the wide open cyberspaces.

The open range of the lower FM is being crowded with radio imperialists who wish to drive away the little/or non-profits. These infotainment megamediacritics desire to regulate every segment of electronic communication (they've already got the pulp media) and force the change from participatory *free & easy* to (so-called) professionally staffed, market oriented, censored and insipid commercial radio. The people who chase a buck tolerate no other purpose in life. Their attitude toward public radio is to swallow it whole.

The battleground is nothing less than worldwide domination of infotainment fought over by huge ambitious commercial media cartels. Profits promise to be as astronomical as the competition for the money is fierce and merciless. No place for compassion or even sensibility, only relentless combat in a corporate world war that will destroy the media village to rule it.

KMUN is obviously small fry, a mouse underneath the feet of rampaging rhinoceri. Yet the large consequence trickles down to the least considered.

Masking blatant greed with hypocritical ideological rubric, commercial media moguls attack public radio and television as *Liberal*, *Socialist*, and *Elitist*, a rather insoluble mix.

If it were up to the Federal Communications Commission, Paul Harvey and Mantovani would be the standards of radio broadcasting. Sex & Shock Radio in particular convulse the FCC into apocalyptic frenzy, and the Commission is not especially fond of the First Amendment, regarding it as too liberal and libertine.

It is unfortunate that many people agree with the FCC. They seem to feel that there is already too much liberty in America Incorporated, that it disrupts the sacred American dream of everlasting purchasing power and blessed consumption, and that it espouses bizarre ideas and equally esoteric lifestyles that threaten to bewitch, bother and bewilder them.

Commercial radio is of course no problem. It does not wish to disturb or offend anybody but instead projects a boundless *Land of Oz & Harriet*, easily attained with Master Charge. A few chilling commercials exemplify the dismal wasteland on the AM and upper end of the FM dial, advertising motels in which no one is surprised or radio stations that say the same thing about their programming — nothing new, imaginative or provocative, just the same old twaddle about adolescent love and tears and car crashes to ensure perpetual cranial remission and pimply midlife orgasms.



JOAN BRAMBILLA DAVID

Rather than hands-on radio, the commercial stations reduce their listeners to consumers and treat them as empty-headed children amok in toy stores.

Controversy, original ideas and experimental broadcasting are anathema to commercial radio which depends instead upon innocuous pabulum focused on a primordial mental range to hype the unnecessary and the indigestible.

The endless saturation of high-pitched patter put out by commercial media sugarcoats the brain. The inane music and schlock squeezed grudgingly inbetween insipid commercials is hardly memorable enough to interfere with the dense airwave of consumer capitalism.

The pervasive influence of advertising is much greater than the more ballyhooed TV violence or shock radio. Listeners and viewers are prodded several times an hour to purchase and consume a bewildering variety of products that purport to satisfy every craving or longing, every passion and desire. Advertising blends into a general perception of life, no longer separate pitches to purchase individual products but instead a miasmal cultural warp; an unconscious assumption of life as advertised overtakes the sense of life as it really is, attempting to mold and define whoever is within range of its brain-dead contagion.

Commercial media is allied with the political and religious right in its wish to pamper the American brain as a wilful child and desynapse its thoughtweaves while cleansing it of reason and maturity. Public and listener-sponsored media such as KMUN intend the opposite, devoted to stretching and amplifying the American brain. This is anathema to commercial media whose only purpose is to sell products. Corporate capitalism in league with political and religious ultra-conservatism shuns diversity, though the contradiction between sensual materialism and ecumenical tyranny might ultimately be disharmonious to the alliance.

Public broadcasting does not intend to remanufacture its listeners and viewers. Cradle to grave consumerism is neither its means nor its ends. Instead it attempts to counter the trend of perpetual adolescence with appeals to thought and intellect are serious and varied and shaped to adult responsibility in an increasingly complex and corrupt democracy.

American society undervalues endeavors that do not seek profit. The bottom line of America is *The Bottom Line*. From childhood most Americans are taught that money and its purchase power are society's vitality and the only true pursuit of happiness.

Yet there are among the busy self-interested population many who wish for generous community interaction and equity rather than couch potato apathy and home shopping. Their voices seem lost on the floor of the national stock market and are at present shoved aside. KMUN reflects a few of those voices. A small radio station at the bottom of the FM dial in a far off corner of the nation. But it is here, *On The Air*, where incredible varieties of ideas incubate and are sounded.

The problem with "community radio" is also one of its most attractive features. Instead of commercial sponsors who buy airtime and impose their Babbity upon the content of programs, KMUN and its sister/parent station KBOO in Portland, depend upon a community of listeners for financial survival. They are KMUN's (and KBOO's) lifelines. That is why programmers, virtually all of them unpaid volunteers, grovel and beg during pledge drives.

Big money radio broadcasts for big bucks. Public radio strangles for loose change to stay on the air. Community radio stations like KMUN are always looking for a dollar so they can broadcast. It is a listener sponsored station that depends on its funding primarily from listeners, which is why its listeners are subjected a couple of times a year to promotions, pitches, pleas and whines for new and old members to pledge cash, also puts on fundraising benefits with local and traveling musicians and performers and each year sponsors a famous auction.

Silence on radio is known as dead air, which if committed is broadcasting's most unpardonable blunder. Radio created the demand for every *picosecond*\* filled with noise and insistent din. No time is granted to reflect on anything heard the previous *picosecond*. Dead air is more truthfully the shock of not finding a familiar and perhaps favored station at its usual spot on the radio dial.

The line of communication is tenuous and expensive. Listeners argue about the cost and value of the satellite menus as well as the local venue — but that is what community radio is all about, undaunted by megamedia and the self-interested cynicism that underlies our bottom line society.

Think universally, act locally; a majority begins with one — What a person does, reads, listens to and thinks about form the character and ideas necessary not only for a personally gratifying life but one that assists in alleviating the poverty or oppression of other lives.

Perhaps that is too heavy a burden and too extravagant a promise to place upon a radio station like KMUN. Yet it is a voice that not only attempts to reflect a community but also to inform it, to present ideas, thoughts and opinions that commercial media finds unprofitable and thus shuns as if they were diseases.

Ironically, despite outrageous claims by corporate megamedia that it alone represents democracy and the First Amendment, a small public radio station like KMUN depends upon true democracy to survive, and it does survive because ordinary citizens keep it alive.

Radio waves beam out beyond Earth into galactic space. Humanity's reputation might well rest on which signal reaches other sentient life first — Rush Limbaugh or KMUN, gutsy and freewheeling *Radio Free Columbia Pacific*.

\*One/trillionth of a second.

## JUST THE FACTS

Defining journalism is slippery this year 2000 because the profession seems to be emerging from a long period of stagnant obsession with the impossible quest for objectivity, always questionable at best, a deceitful masquerade at its worst.

Journalism is bursting out in a variety of directions, some like infotainment and simulated events unfortunate — but other spinoffs act as stimulants to broaden the definition and scope of journalism, and that includes active advocacy in response to theoretical objectivity.

The staunch era of objectivity in reporting humanity's daily turbulence has never been entirely successful. The rules were that personality was to be left out of reporting the facts of events. Human minds, however, are not autonomic; they are colored with imagination and point of view which is synonymous with angle of reference.

The pursuit of objectivity as the cornerstone of journalism was promulgated by such well-placed commentators as Walter Lippman in the early years of the 20th century. The bad old days of reckless and unsavory partisanship by the mainstream press were declared over and the era of *'Just the facts'*, as Joe Friday used to say on every TV show of *'Dragnet'*, was ushered in as the new form of American journalism. Editorial commentary was separated from reporting in essence as well as in sections of newspapers and later on radio and television news broadcasts.

Objectivity in reportage is a fine ideal but human beings who record events, or as Gene Fowler said, journalists who "shoot history on the wing" are creatures of their cultures, classes and education, and their attempts at unbiased witness are yet shaped by conscious and/or unconscious prejudices and inculcated values.

The insidious aspect of objectivity is that inevitably the form is used to disguise very partisan ideas and perspectives, most notably by those who manage and rule society and own the major media.

The partisan press is at least open about what it represents and the axes it grinds. A reader knows exactly where the editors and reporters of an advocacy publication (or broadcast media) stand. In the bad old days when the mainstream press was unabashedly partisan, readers were exposed to a vigorous variety of ideas and opinions. For all its renowned excesses, prejudice and hysteria, the partisan press was in thunderous opposition with itself while under the rubric of objectivity today's media cautiously imitates itself.

The concept of objectivity might be regarded as a conspiracy of projecting a status quo, which is a particular way of viewing things and is obviously a partisan operation, and disagreement with this agreed upon fiction is dismissed as naive or dangerous partisanship or advocacy on the far-out fringe of American journalism. Yet it is the fringe that is vigorously redefining the ideas, concepts and principles of contemporary journalism.

The central purpose is to inform — but that is not a passive occupation. The purpose of informing presumes a consequence, an action or reaction regarding the information that is disseminated.

The broadest definition of a reporter, therefore, is anyone who has something to report, regardless of whether they are schooled or employed in journalism.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

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